

# Genital wart virus linked to cancer, researchers fear

by Linda Rockey  
Times staff reporter

Cases of genital warts are increasing at epidemic rates in this country, and researchers fear the sexually transmitted viruses are linked to cancer of the cervix and other body tissues.

Wart viruses were the most common of the major sex-related diseases seen by doctors in the past few years — at least three to four times more common than genital herpes, says Dr. King Holmes, a University of Washington professor of medicine.

While the number of people infected with genital warts is not known, a federal study shows that visits to doctors for this condition quadrupled in the past decade. Holmes suspects that many cases go undetected in people with little or no symptoms.

Like herpes, warts are extremely difficult to treat, according to Holmes, a leading expert on sexually transmitted diseases. He heads a Seattle research team with a \$1 million federal grant to study the link between such diseases and dysplasia (precancerous cell changes in the cervix).

Some 500,000 of the 26 million U.S. women who receive pap smears each year have dysplasia which, if untreated, can progress to cancer in several years. A high proportion of women with mild dysplasia also have warts, as many as 80 percent in one study, according to Holmes.

"There is cause for concern, but not for panic," said James McDougall, of Fred Hutchinson Cancer Research Center. His studies have found wart viruses in at least 30 percent of cancerous cervical tissue. That percentage may prove even higher, he says, as researchers improve techniques to probe the genetics of these viruses.

Genital warts are the latest in a series of sexually transmitted infections to cause concern among disease-control experts in recent years. Holmes suspects the epidemic increase in these diseases stems from major changes in population and sexual behavior.

"Just as population growth has economic feedback, the baby boom has major biological implications," he said. With changes in dating behavior, such as the popularity of singles bars, he says people have "a much greater chance of bumping into one of these (infections) when they go out at night."

Doctors, even specialists, are just beginning to learn about genital warts, according to Holmes. Methods of treatment range from surgery and medication to freezing techniques and laser therapy. Often nothing works, especially if the virus coats the inside of the vagina or covers the cervical opening to the uterus.

Women who had a brief bout with genital warts on the vulva several years ago should not panic, says Dr. Joseph Chu, a gynecologist in cancer prevention research at the Hutchinson Center. He emphasizes that not all warts turn into cancer and many go away without treatment.

It's important to get a proper diagnosis of warts, Chu says. Some lesions that look like warts turn out to be cancer confined to a small area, but some are as inconsequential as a skin tag from an episiotomy (incision made during childbirth).

Some research indicates that warts go away on their own, but Carol Winter, a nurse practitioner in the herpes clinic at Harborview Medical Center, says that those infected shouldn't think, "Oh, well I've just got warts."

She says she tells women with warts on the cervix that "we really don't know the role the wart virus plays, but you can't ignore it." She urges them to have pap smears every three to six months and to be examined with a special magnifying instrument called a colposcope to see if the warts change in appearance or move around.

Having fewer sex partners would diminish the chances of getting warts, says Chu, and condoms would help, but it's hard to get people to change sexual habits. "They are not going to examine all their partners for warts or herpes," he said.

And even if they did, the warts aren't always apparent. Many so-called "invisible" genital warts cannot be seen without a colposcope, says Holmes. Unlike warts on the rest of the body, genital warts may have a flat appearance. Often they are frond-like or rough in appearance.

German studies have identified at least 20 different human wart viruses. Some have an affinity for the feet, others for hands and still others for the genitals. Holmes suspects that only certain types are linked to cancer.

The Seattle-King County Health Department's sexually transmitted diseases clinic at Harborview sees twice as many cases of genital warts as herpes. Many women there have evidence of both viruses on the cervix.

Some research suggests that herpes makes the wart virus malignant, says Chu, but the evidence is not clear.

Wart and herpes viruses also may work in concert with other factors such as smoking, says Holmes. Smoking has been linked to cervical cancer in recent studies, along with the classic risk factor associated with this disease: number of sex partners.

Research suggests that wart viruses also are implicated in less common forms of cancer, including:

- Cancer of the penis — This rare disease tends to be associated with warts, says Chu. Some experts report that warts on the penis often cannot be diagnosed without looking inside the male urethra or examining the skin of the penis with a colposcope.

- Cancer of the vulva — The most common form of this rare cancer is associated with warts in 50 to 60 percent of cases studied, says Chu. He and other researchers at the Hutchinson Center are studying this cancer to see if they can identify wart or herpes viruses in the tumor tissue itself.

- Cancer of the anus — Hutchinson Center studies indicate cancer of the anus is 10 times more common in homosexual men. This may be related to transmission of wart and/or herpes virus during anal intercourse, Holmes says.

- Cancer of the larynx. Babies who pass through the birth canal of women infected with genital warts sometimes are born with warts in the larynx. "They are next to incurable because the infant doesn't mount a proper immune response," says Holmes. The warts, remain, causing recurrent problems and possibly resulting in cancer.

Cervical cancer is of special concern, experts say. Although incidence of this disease dropped nearly 40 percent between the 1960s and 1970s as a result of early detection and treatment, it is on the rise again in young women. Nearly 60,000 U.S. women died of cervical cancer between 1970 and 1979.

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## DISCIPLINE

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students disciplined was not being reduced.

One of the first things Steele did when he became superintendent in 1981 was to initiate an intensive policy study on discipline. That led to adoption of five "get tough" discipline policies, which went into effect in the 1982-83 school year.

The policies require mandatory attendance, penalize students for unexcused absences, call for strict classroom discipline, require persons who damage school property to make restitution, eliminate automatic passing to the next grade

and allow suspended or expelled students back in school only if they demonstrate improvement in attitude or behavior.

According to a survey last spring, most Seattle teachers did not see any drop in the number of discipline problems in their classrooms as a result of the new policies, but principals believed that the new emphasis enabled them to defuse more potentially serious problems.

But school records show that suspensions have gone up and so have the number of students who fail to automatically pass on to the next grade.

Long-term suspensions in 1980-81 totaled 1,000 students, while 224 were expelled. The next year, the year before the new policies took effect, the district suspended 1,372

and expelled 252. With the new discipline policies in force, suspensions rose to 1,662 last year, but expulsions dropped to 188.

Schools officials said the drop in expulsions is because fewer elementary- and middle-school youngsters were kicked out last year, not because of a drop in the high-school exclusions.

Last year, Seattle suspended or expelled 4 percent of its total enrollment, compared with 5.8 percent for Highline, 1.5 percent for Edmonds and only .6 percent for Shoreline.

Two areas which Seattle, unlike the other districts, has made part of its formal discipline policies is the decision not to promote students from one grade level to another unless they achieve a certain performance level, and not

to re-admit long-term suspended or expelled students unless they demonstrate improved attitudes or behavior.

The number of students failing grades has risen dramatically under the policy. In June 1982, 535 elementary pupils were ticketed to repeat grades, as were 343 middle-school students. Last June, there were 948 in elementary grades and 614 in middle schools.

When the Seattle School Board adopted those two policies, it also accepted the responsibility — at the urging of community student-advocacy groups — to do something for students who risk academic failure and who need help to change their behavior.

Last year, the district spent \$407,836 on its first free summer-school program.

# Seattle has programs aimed at 'attracting white kids'

## OPTIONS

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area district that has a program tailored for the exceptionally gifted: the Individual Progress Plan, offered at Madrona Elementary and Washington Middle Schools. IPP middle-school students sometimes also take classes at Garfield High School.

IPP is for the exceptionally bright, the top 1 percent academically.

"Whereas many of the suburban districts just now are developing them," Reed says Seattle high schools for years have been involved in the advanced-placement honors classes fostered by the College Board, the nonprofit association that offers guidance, college-admission testing and financial-aid services.

Students who take advanced

courses in such subjects as American history, calculus, English composition and literature, biology and foreign languages are eligible for college credits if their grades are high enough.

More than two-thirds of Seattle high-school students who took advanced-placement exams last year earned marks high enough to qualify for credit.

Rainier Beach High School students took 71 AP exams, more than any other public high school in the

state. All Seattle high schools were involved with AP tests, with Garfield students taking 66 and Roosevelt 55. The private Lakeside School topped them, all with 123 tests, but it is known for catering to and developing top students.

"You just don't develop these programs overnight," Reed said. "It takes years to train teachers and for them to become competent. I think Seattle can be proud of its performance in the advanced-placement area."

# College-bound children match suburban cousins

## TESTS

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reading and math scores that year were 60 and 62.

Keeping in mind that it was a different test, the Bellevue sample showed scores of 75 in reading and 86 in math computation.

Another way of assessing how well schools do is to look at their college-bound population. When it

comes to these students, Seattle test scores almost match those in suburban districts.

"Some of the high schools with the strongest records in grades achieved here at the UW are from the Seattle district," says Michael Magie, assistant director of admissions at the University of Washington.

The Times reviewed the 1982 precollege test results from four Seattle high schools — Garfield, Ingraham, Roosevelt and Chief Sealth — and four suburban high

schools — Bellevue, Edmonds, Shorecrest in the Shoreline district and Evergreen in the Highline district.

In reading comprehension on the 1982 test, Bellevue led the pack with a 51.28 score, followed by Shorecrest with 50.24, Roosevelt with 48.69, Garfield with 48.63, Evergreen with 48.01, Ingraham with 45.30 and Chief Sealth with 42.53.

Looking at math achievement, Bellevue again led with a score of 57.8. Roosevelt had 55.22, Ingra-

ham, 52.6; Evergreen, 52.22; Garfield, 51.99; Edmonds, 51.96 and Shorecrest, 51.46. Sealth was at the low end with 49.98.

One reason the college-bound population seems about equally well prepared, whether the student graduated from a suburban high school or an inner-city school, is that the lower-achievers who pull down Seattle's general achievement test scores are not, as a rule, those youngsters who take the precollege test and plan to go on to college.

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